

Steering Committee Meeting

Zoom Meeting

June 16, 2022

1pm to 4pm

MEETING NOTES

Attendees

Regina Lyons, Chair, US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA Region 1)
Caitlin Chaffee, Vice Chair, Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NBNERR)
Richard Carey, MA Department of Environmental Protection (MADEP)
Rachel Calabro, Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH)
Stefanie Covino, Blackstone Watershed Collaborative
Richard Friesner, NEIWPC
Allison Hamel, RI Department of Transportation (RIDOT)
Allen Hance, Roger Williams University (RWU)
Rob Johnston, Clark University
Cristina Kennedy, MA Division of Ecological Restoration (MADER)
Sue Kiernan, RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM)
Hillary King, Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (MAEOEEA)
Tom Kutcher, RI Natural History Survey (RINHS)
Alicia Lehrer, Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council
Eliza Moore, Narragansett Bay Commission (NBC)
Dave Monti, No Fluke Fishing and Providence Journal
Bill Napolitano, Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD)
John O'Brien, The Nature Conservancy, RI Chapter (TNC)
Heidi Ricci, Mass Audubon
Kerri Arsenault, Author
Mike Gerel, NBEP
Mariel Sorlien, NBEP
Courtney Schmidt, NBEP

Meeting Opening

Regina Lyons with EPA Region 1, Chair of the Steering Committee (SC) called the meeting to order at 1:04pm. She welcomed members and asked everyone to introduce themselves. Regina called for a motion to approve the amendment. *DECISION: The notes for the December 16, 2021 meeting were brought forward with a motion and second and unanimously approved by the committee.* Mike Gerel with NBEP noted that the [PPT](#) from today's meeting will be posted later today. Highlights from this presentation and the discussions at the meeting are provided in these notes.

Guest Speaker

Courtney Schmidt with NBEP introduced today's speaker, [Kerri Arsenault](#), author of the book, [Milltown: Reckoning with What Remains](#). Kerri played a [trailer](#) for her book and provided some highlights. She then offered some observations and tips for science communications, including:

- A lot of science writing is a “data dump,” and lacks a story. Real characters are sometimes there, but usually only as a way to share data. People don’t remember data or dates, they remember stories.
- There is a tendency to reminisce about the past and ignore modern problems—folks write from the point of view of a man sitting on a mountain and viewing everything from a distance.
- Avoid academic jargon and acronyms.
- Shy away from clichés like “poor polar bears” and “poor poor people.”
- Writing should ask more questions and provide less prescription.
- Seek broader audiences, don’t just preach to the choir—honor the collective voice.
- OK to be hopeful, but be honest if problems, so people feel a need to act.
- Center on people and the human heart.

During and after the talk and in the Q&A, Kerri and the committee members offered the following thoughts:

- Mariel Sorlien with NBEP noted that importance/sense of place definitely comes through in her comments and writing. She added that she has a sense of sadness, but not to the point of despair.
- Courtney Schmidt with NBEP added Kerri’s words could describe my family—this could be any of our story’s.
- Stefanie Covino with the Blackstone Collaborative said that her work is very relatable to our place, with the photos of mills and their towns.
- Eliza Moore with NBC added that Kerri’s statement about how nature is reciprocating the alteration/damage we inflicted was profound.
- Stefanie said that they are working with RISD in the Blackstone specifically because artists are good at storytelling.
- Dave Monti offered that recreational fishing folks changed strategies from having scientists come in to discuss climate change, to having fishers discuss the changes they witnessed, then having scientists coming in to reaffirm and explain what the fishers have witnessed.
- Mariel that science communication (especially around climate change) often falls in to the trap of focusing exclusively on the problems and/or taking a judgmental tone, often towards rural areas, and I appreciate that this book avoids both of those traps.
- Rachel Calabro with the RIDOH said there are some really nice stories on this [page](#). I have used them with Middle School students. Here is another useful [link](#) on climate-based story telling.
- Mariel followed that narrative and storytelling is a learned skill, often counter to the dry/factual way scientists are trained to write and think. It helps to have specific details to anchor stories around—like events that happen to people (melted sneakers), not data (how many deg C the temp has increased).

Kerri closed the session by previewing a [new course](#) that she will be co-leading at Brown. It is a writing course for scholars, postdocs, faculty, and graduate students in the environmental sciences, social sciences, and humanities who want to marry scholarship with literary storytelling to engage a broad audience for their work. She encouraged folks with questions about this course or her broader work to visit her website linked above or contact her via email at arsenault.kerri@gmail.com. Regina, Courtney, and members of the committee thanked Kerri for joining us today.

Quarterly Program Report

Mike offered the following NBEP quarterly program report.

Financials

The discussion began with Mike sharing the quarterly financial report. He directed the group to the financial table in meeting PPT. NBEP is in great financial health, especially with at least \$909,800 of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding expected during Q1 of FY2022 (reminder that EPA uses the year the funds are awarded). He noted also that we project to have about \$600K left unencumbered from our FY2021 budget at the end of this fiscal year. The Steering Committee will discuss re-budgeting options for these funds in more detail at their September meeting, but our general thinking is to retain \$300K for personnel costs and subaward the remaining \$300K to partners.

New Hires

Mike announced that NBEP had made two new hires. Mariel Sorlien started as our new Geospatial Analysis and Design Manager on May 31st and Darcy Young will start as our Watershed Outreach Manager on July 5th. Mariel comes to us from URI MESM via a government contract position and Darcy attended Clark and comes from the Sarasota Bay National Estuary Program. Committee members welcomed Mariel, and Mike thanked the hiring panels.

Green Infrastructure Subawards

NBEP issued a [press release](#) on May 4th to announce our subaward of \$649,000 to 11 green infrastructure planning projects. Mike noted that this funding will be used to create the pre-conditions for installation of more practices through capacity-building, study, and design. Agreements with RWU are in place for all subawardees and work has begun on several projects.

FY2022 Work Planning

NBEP has drafted two separate FY2022 Work Plans and Budgets for BIL and our “base” (\$320 and SNEP) funding. These documents are responsive to the findings of our outreach to stakeholders across our study area over the last year. With significant federal funding newly available, supporting more capacity in organizations with the expertise and local agency to advance projects from idea to construction was uniformly viewed as the biggest need. EPA Guidance for BIL funds is pending, so we may need to circle back and make changes to that package. Base funding is expected around October 1st and BIL funds by the end of the year. Mike noted that on June 6th the Executive Committee sent both packages to this committee for action. We will discuss these plans later in this meeting.

DEIJ Assessment

Mike noted that NBEP has completed its DEIJ Assessment by holding a 3-hour workshop on May 26th. The objectives of the event were to reflect on the region’s history, new feedback from our underserved communities, and then prioritize actions NBEP and partners can take to elevate and amplify DEIJ in our work. Priorities included (1) going to communities to attend events to listen, learn, and build connection, (2) streamlining delivery of capacity funding to community groups/leaders with agency to act locally, and (3) continuing our pilot actions begun in 2021 (e.g., paying speaker stipends, hiring an outreach manager, including proposal scoring criteria that provide credit for benefits to environmental justice areas). A recording of the workshop and written notes are available [here](#).

Vision 2032 Re-start

NBEP paused its work on Vision 2032 in 2021 to await new staff and the ability to meet in-person. In the interim, we considered the significant feedback captured to date through the Vision 2032 Subcommittee and planning groups to create a list of 50 preliminary actions and subtasks, which when built into ~30 final Action Plans, will form the core of Vision 2032. We also created an Action Plan Worksheet to aid in the step-wise development of each Action Plan. Now that we are fully staffed-up and in-person meetings are returning, we expect to reconvene the subcommittee in Providence in August-September. Expect an invite email soon.

Blackstone Initiative

Mike shared that NBEP continues to support the Lower Blackstone Fish Passage Core Team, which was formally convened by RIDEM last fall to improve connectivity for aquatic wildlife and people. NBEP facilitated 1-on-1 meetings with Core Team members through early summer, which led to RIDEM's decision that a conceptual design for passing for all four dams was needed to get this effort unstuck. RIDEM also has assigned a staffer member to support the Director's office on this project. NBEP is proposing to use some BIL funding to support the design work. In other news, he also noted that NBEP is financially supporting an intern at Clark University to work with the Blackstone River Collaborative, and is proposing to fund RISD to lead a headwaters to Bay Blackstone River paddle from August 11th to 14th. More below on Blackstone funding.

Plastics Event

NBEP will be hosting a Plastics Workshop on October 7th at RWU titled, *Macro to Microplastic in the Narragansett Bay*. Courtney has assembled an impressive group of experts to participate in a 1-day learning forum to share the state of research and pollution in the Bay and inform future work. See more info [here](#).

Steering Committee Updates (Provided via Chat)

Stefanie Covino with the [Blackstone Watershed Collaborative](#) noted that there was a sewage release into the Blackstone by the Woonsocket WWTP. See this [article](#) from the Boston Globe and [this](#) from the Valley Breeze. The Collaborative is convening a Zoom tomorrow, June 17th at 10am to discuss the issue with Joe Haberek, RIDEM's Administrator of Surface Water Protection (and member of NBEP's Science Advisory Committee). She also noted that she will be joining the RISD Blackstone paddle. Folks can contact Stefanie (Covino scovino@clarku.edu) or visit this [site](#) for information about events and ways you can participate.

Sue Kiernan with [RIDEM](#) provided a further update on the Woonsocket WWTP spill. The plant has been meeting its wastewater effluent limits as of last Friday, June 10th. The problem relates to solids handling, specifically the gravity thickening component of the system. Inefficient solids capture resulted in higher amounts of solids being recycled into the clarifiers. After thickening, the WWTP solids are normally directed to the Synagro biosolids facility. As an interim solution, belt presses are being installed alleviate the solids problem and an engineering evaluation to fix the issue long-term is underway. RIDEM is currently re-evaluating the water contact advisory.

Alicia Lehrer with the [Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council](#) noted a few events taking place this coming Saturday, June 18th at Riverside Park, including birding [walk](#) along the river at 9:30am and make-your-own rain barrel [workshop](#) from 12-4pm.

Proposed FY2021 Workplan Amendment to Add New Blackstone Paddle Task

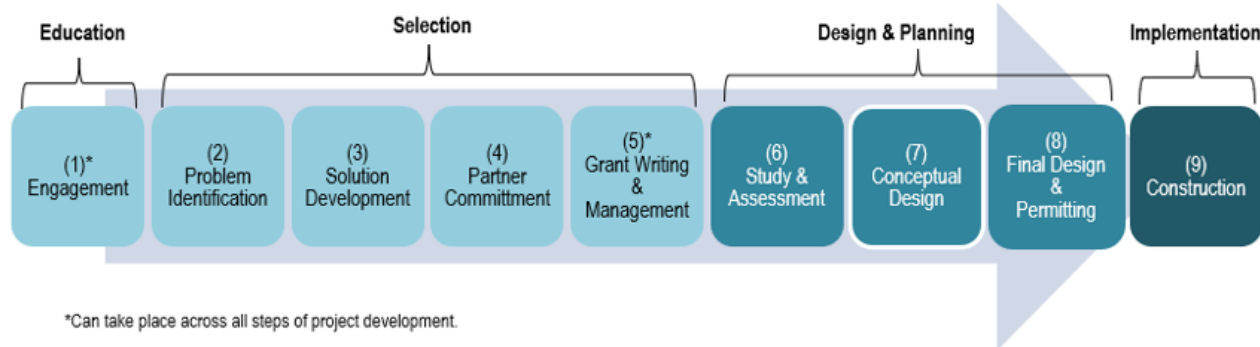
Mike opened the discussion by stating that NBEP's [Bylaws](#) require that new tasks not in the Annual Workplan must be reviewed by the Executive Committee and approved by the Steering Committee. NBEP proposes to amend our active FY2021 Workplan to add a new task to provide \$15,000 to RISD to underwrite the *Blackstone River Expedition 2022*, some local partners who will paddle the 48-mile length of the river from Worcester to Pawtucket from August 11th to 14th, with educational events at milestones along the way, concluding with a group paddle and celebration at the Narragansett Brewery in Providence. Funds will be used to pay speakers, print posters, purchase gear, provide transportation, and purchase liability insurance. The Executive Committee sent the amendment to this committee for review and approval today. Regina called for a motion to approve the amendment. **DECISION: The proposed amendment was brought forward with a motion and a second and unanimously approved (Stefanie Covino and Tom Kutcher abstained).**

Background on Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Justice 40

Regina provided a brief overview of the Biden Administration’s [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#) and [Justice 40 Initiative](#). Further EPA guidance for National Estuary Program’s on BIL and Justice 40 is expected this summer. Click the provided hyperlinks for details and consult the meeting [PPT](#) for some further information on how these efforts will impact NBEP.

NBEP BIL Workplan and Budget

Mike noted that NBEP will be receiving \$909,800 in BIL funds each year for five years, starting with FY2022. No non-federal match is required as of now. As noted earlier, local capacity at municipalities and community groups with the mandate and agency to develop projects locally is the #1 barrier to building a pipeline of conservation projects that can avail themselves of future BIL and other new sources of state and federal funding. Mike next offered some definitions to put NBEP’s proposed use for BIL funds in context. Projects are actions that reduce pollution, restore habitat, improve climate resilience, and advance environmental equity. Project development is the process of advancing projects through the 4-phase, 9-step process from problem to construction (see graphic below). Projects advanced is an activity that advances a project at least 1 step forward in this process.



He noted that in response to local feedback and research on how best to create the pre-conditions for more projects, especially in disadvantaged communities, NBEP proposes to use all BIL funds in **Year 1** to offer direct subawards to eight carefully selected organizations we find have the ability to help projects. We estimate that roughly 80% of these funds will benefit disadvantaged areas. The table below summarizes the information Mike emphasized for each subaward (see the meeting PPT for more specifics):

Subawardee	Geographic Focus	Project Development Phases	Primary Metric	Funding
Providence Racial & Environmental Justice Committee	South Providence and Olneyville neighborhoods, Providence, RI	Education, Selection	10 projects advanced	\$100,000
SRPEDD	Middle and Lower Taunton Watershed, MA	Education, Selection Design & Planning	10 projects advanced	\$100,000
Old Colony Planning Council	Brockton and vicinity, MA	Education, Selection Design & Planning	6 projects advanced	\$75,000
Groundwork Southcoast	Fall River, MA	Education, Selection Design & Planning	6 projects advanced	\$85,000
Save The Bay	Narragansett Bay and Coastal Ponds, RI and MA	Selection, Design & Planning	10 projects advanced	\$100,000

Subawardee	Geographic Focus	Project Development Phases	Primary Metric	Funding
Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association	Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed, RI	Design & Planning Implementation	1 planning document for barrier removal 2 projects completed	\$134,800
The Nature Conservancy of RI	Lower Blackstone River Watershed, RI	Design & Planning	1 set of conceptual designs for fish passage	\$300,000
Blackstone River Watershed Council	Blackstone River Watershed, RI	Education	25 engagements	\$15,000

The expected outcomes from this Year 1 work are summarized in the table below:

Term	Outcomes
Short (1 year)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 50 projects advanced closer to implementation. • Conceptual plans in place for the largest fish passage effort in Bay watershed history. • More shovel-ready cold-water stream connectivity projects in the Upper Wood-Pawcatuck.
Medium (5 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more secure network of local staff and expertise. • Conditions in place to bring in more funds and implement more projects in the study area.
Long (10+ years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More high-quality projects are constructed and maintained in the region.

Mike shared that we will evaluate the success achieving proposed metrics and outcomes to inform whether to maintain the Year 1 approach (e.g., fund same subawardees for a second year) or make refinements.

At their meeting on June 6th, the Executive Committee sent the BIL Workplan and Budget to this committee with a request that NBEP staff further describe the reasoning for the use of direct subawards for project development, better define the ‘project advanced’ metric, and clarify outcomes. The revised Workplan discussed today includes these changes.

There was broad support on the committee the Workplan. Stefanie with the Blackstone Collaborative and Heidi Ricci with Mass Audubon specifically supported the Year 1 focus on capacity-building so we have more organizations/people that can get through the rigors of local project development. Tom Kutcher with RINHS liked the step-wise project development process. John O’Brien spoke to the importance of the Lower Blackstone fish passage work and how getting a plan in place can move the effort forward after 20 years of fits and starts. Sue Kiernan with RIDEM backed the approach, but cautioned that subawardees seek early commitment from municipalities (Step 4) and that we track progress to ensure truly viable projects are being developed. She also offered some perspective on The Nature Conservancy’s use of state bond funds to help pay for Blackstone fishway design work and encouraged us to assure planning in the Wood-Pawtucket includes field ground-truthing of potential culvert projects.

Regina noted that the committee has two options. They can provisionally approve the Workplan and Budget (provisional because we’re awaiting EPA BIL guidance) or take no action today and act when the guidance is released. The consensus was that provisional approval was the best approach. Regina called for a motion. *DECISION: The BIL Workplan and Budget were brought forward with a motion from Richard Friesner with NEIWPC and a second from Hillary King with MAEOEEA and were unanimously provisionally approved (Bill Napolitano with SRPEDD and John with TNC abstained)* Mike noted that staff will review the guidance when it is released, make any necessary edits, and come back to the committee for final approval.

NBEP §320 and SNEP Workplan and Budget

Mike continued that NBEP will receive \$1,000,000 in base funding for FY2022, including \$750,000 in §320 funds and \$250K in SNEP funding. 1:1 non-federal match is required. The table below describes the 4 objectives and 15 tasks included in the Workplan. The plan is very similar to last year, with removal of 2 tasks now required by the bylaws and addition of a tribal land acknowledgement task.

Objective	Task
1. Ensure Sound Program Management.	a. Program Leadership.
	b. Host Institution Program Support.
	c. EPA Work Plan and Budget Development and Tracking.
	d. Committee Support.
	e. Land Acknowledgment Development.
	f. Grant Writing.
2. Provide Watershed Analysis and Planning.	a. Science Working Group Facilitation.
	b. Status and Trends Updates.
	c. Vision 2032 Development.
	d. Blackstone River Initiative Implementation.
3. Award Project Funding.	a. Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve Succotash Marsh Resilience Project Subaward.
4. Deliver Targeted Tech Transfer.	a. Annual Science Event.
	b. NEPORT Reporting.
	c. Southeast New England Program Support.
	d. Strategic Outreach.

He next added that budget includes 1-year of personnel time for 4 full time staff and 2 interns, contracts to support Vision 2032 development, crafting of a land acknowledgement, community engagement payments, and non-RWU interns. Direct subawards of \$200,000 to NBNERR to develop a plan for sediment placement at Succotash Marsh in South Kingstown, RI and \$50,000 to Clark University to continue our support of the Blackstone Watershed Collaborative. Almost \$300,000 in match is in place, so we need another \$700,000 to meet our requirement. Mike encouraged folks to submit match forms to him ASAP.

There were no specific questions on this package from the committee. Regina called for a motion. *DECISION: the §320 and SNEP Workplan and Budget were brought forward with a motion by Heidi and second by Bill and unanimously approved (Caitlin Chaffee with NBNERR and Rob Johnston and Stefanie Covino with Clark abstained).*

Closing

Regina and Mike thanked the group for spending some extra time to through the agenda and in a place to accept more funds for FY2023 than NBEP has ever received.

Action Items

1. NBEP will review EPA BIL Guidance when received, revise the BIL Workplan and Budget is appropriate, and come back to the Steering Committee for approval.
2. SC members are encouraged to submit non-federal match forms for our §320/SNEP award ASAP.

Upcoming Meetings

- Executive Committee: August 9, 2022 from 1-3pm via Zoom.
- Steering Committee: September 15, 2022 from 1-4pm via Zoom.
- Vision 2032 Subcommittee Meeting reboot: August-September TBD in-person at RIDEM in Providence.
- Plastics Workshop: October 7th from 8:00am to 4:00pm in-person at RWU.

Meeting adjourned 4:20pm